

'I would just like to know what happened to him. That's all'

Missing at Tumbling Creek

Mystery shrouds Tazewell man's 2017 disappearance

BY JASMINE FRANKS
Staff

Five years after a Tazewell County man seemingly vanished at the Clinch Mountain Wildlife Area just inside of Smyth County, investigators and family members are still hoping for the lead that will help uncover his fate.

The search for then 46-year-old Gary Shannon Earp came to a standstill just weeks after police found his abandoned Toyota pickup in a gravel pull-off on Tumbling Creek Road in 2017.

Smyth County investigator Lt. Tony McCormick said the truck had been idling with the driver's door open when it was discovered just after midnight on Saturday, June 3.

'He got up Wednesday morning and asked me if I wanted breakfast, and I said, 'no, no, go ahead.' And that's the last time I heard his voice.'

- Gary Earp
Father of missing man

Gary's father, the elder Gary Earp, last saw his son late the previous Tuesday evening and last spoke to him Wednesday morning. The family had just returned on Monday from a Memorial Day weekend camping trip in the Tumbling Creek area and was settling back into their weekly routines.

"He got up Wednesday morning and asked me if I wanted breakfast and I said, 'no, no, go ahead.' And, that's the last time I heard his voice," Earp said.

The then 70-year-old's world would come crashing down around him in the coming days. That evening, Earp learned from another son that his grandson was in critical condition at a hospital in North Carolina. Earp spent the next few days by his family's side before returning to his Bluefield home late Friday night.

That Saturday morning, Earp said, he was sitting on his porch with his coffee,

discovered just after midnight on Saturday, June 3.

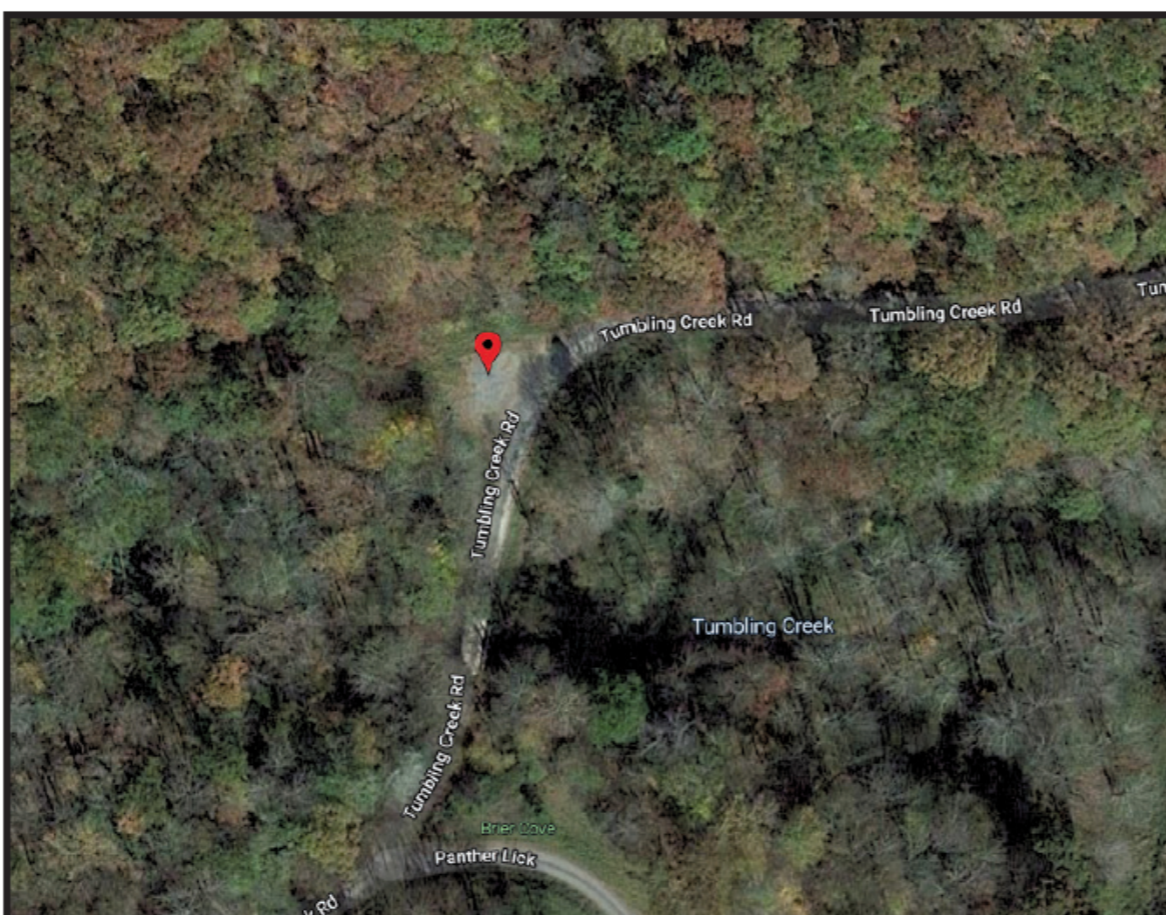
"That was an interesting detail," McCormick said of the open door.

Inside the truck, investigators found Gary's wallet with cash and cards still inside, his glasses and a bag of uneaten Hardee's breakfast.

Gary's father, the elder Gary



JEFFREY SIMMONS/WYTHEVILLE ENTERPRISE



The Tumbling Creek area is a remote section near the Tazewell, Smyth and Washington lines that features waterfalls and wilderness. (Left) Google satellite VIEW image © 2021 Commonwealth of Virginia, Maxar technologies, USDA Farm Service Agency Map Data : Gary Earp's truck was found idling in a gravel pull off on Tumbling Creek Road just after midnight on June 3, 2017.

trying to gather his bearings when police arrived to break the news that they'd found Gary's truck near Tumbling Creek and had not been able to locate Gary.

"It just all went to crap then," Earp said. "If it wasn't a crappy week already, it definitely went to crap then."

Days later, Earp's grandson died and he returned to North Carolina.

"That was a terrible two weeks for me, it really was," Earp said. "I just didn't know what to do."

Following the discovery of Gary's truck,

police with the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources, the Virginia State Police and the Smyth and Tazewell county sheriff's offices scoured the area searching for Gary. Two days later a search and rescue team with the Virginia Department of Emergency management began a three-week search of a vast swath of the public land.

Meanwhile, McCormick and his colleagues, assisted by Tazewell County investigators, began interviewing people who knew Gary and those who had been



PHOTO COURTESY SMYTH COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

Gary Shannon Earp's truck was found in the Tumbling Creek area, just inside Smyth County, with the motor running, the door open and a bag of uneaten Hardee's breakfast inside.

In an effort to bring awareness, renew interest and, hopefully, generate some tips, Community Newspapers of Southwest Virginia has launched a new Cold Case series that will spotlight unsolved cases in the region.

Influenced by the creation of the Virginia State Police's cold case database that launched earlier this summer, the Cold Case series will feature unsolved missing persons and homicide cases investigated by the state police, as well as those that fall into town and county jurisdictions.

To reach as many eyeballs as possible, and hopefully jog the memories of those with information that could help solve a case, the series will run in the Wytheville Enterprise, the Bland County Messenger, the Smyth County News & Messenger, the Washington County News, the Clinch Valley News & Richlands Press, and the Floyd Press. Stories will also be published online at www.swvatoday.com.

The Cold Case series will kick off with a look at the disappearance of Gary Shannon Earp, a Tazewell County man whose truck was found idling in a pull off in the Clinch Mountain Wildlife Management Area in Smyth County.



PHOTO COURTESY SMYTH COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

Gary Shannon Earp of Tazewell has been missing since 2017.

in the area that day, trying to find a lead on where he might be. Through their investigation, they learned he'd been spotted by a few loggers at the end of Tumbling Creek Road around 3 p.m. on Thursday. Another man reported that he'd run into Gary in Saltville, the town nearest the wildlife area, early Friday morning, and the Hardee's purchase put him in Chilhowie Friday night.

McCormick noted that the truck had been fully functional mechanically, had no flat tires and enough gas to make it back out of the area. The Toyota was later sent for a full forensic workup, but nothing significant to the investigation could be found.

McCormick said attempts to locate Gary using his cell phone location were unsuccessful due to lack of service and

Missing

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a search of cell phone records turned up nothing useful. Searches of Gary's social media accounts also proved unhelpful with no activity having been recorded for a lengthy period of time before his disappearance.

Earp's father said camping and fishing at Tumbling Creek had been a family tradition for several decades. The family had enjoyed the Memorial Day trip the weekend before, he said.

"We all went over there that weekend and camped out and fished and had a great time," Earp said.

But, he said, his son hadn't mentioned to anyone that he'd planned to return to the area.

While Earp said he hadn't noticed any strange behavior from his son leading up to his disappearance, he acknowledged there were some inconsistencies in Gary's habits that he didn't learn of until well after he went missing.

According to court records, Gary had been scheduled that Thursday for a review hearing in Tazewell County Circuit Court on a not guilty by reason of insanity plea. He'd entered the plea in 2014 on a probation violation charge that stemmed from an earlier child abuse conviction. When Gary did not appear at the Thursday hearing, the court issued a *capias* for his arrest the fol-

lowing day.

His missing the hearing appears to stand in contrast to the character portrayed in a letter written days earlier to the court by Gary's probation officer. In the letter, Probation Officer Phillip Ward, who'd overseen Gary's probation since December 2016, described Gary as a "model probationer," saying, "he has produced negative drug screens; reported to the probation office as instructed; has followed his mental health conditional release requirements and has successfully abided by all conditions of probation."

In a second letter requesting the *capias* written that Friday, the day before Gary's truck was found on Tumbling Creek Road, Ward said Gary hadn't appeared for his hearing the previous day, hadn't shown up to perform his court-ordered community service that Tuesday and that Tazewell County deputies had been dispatched to his residence the previous day.

Ward declined to be interviewed for this story.

Neither McCormick nor his counterparts in Tazewell County could verify the law enforcement response to Gary's home.

Gary's father, however, described his son as a "punctual" man who never missed appointments or hearings, and who went beyond expectations at the food pantry in Richlands where he performed his community service.

Gary had been living with

his father since his separation from his wife and had previously struggled with his mental health. Earp said his son, who'd experienced episodes of paranoia, had been discharged after a lengthy stay at the Southwestern Virginia Mental Health Institute in Marion about six months prior to his disappearance. He said his son had made great progress and had set goals for himself, with an ultimate goal of getting some degree of custody of his daughters.

The elder Earp said his son, who'd previously worked as an engineer for Tazewell County, had planned to ask the court to allow him to seek regular employment at the missed review hearing.

"He wanted to get off disability and get out and be a productive person and he was doing everything he could to achieve that goal," Earp said.

"He knew that he had to be there to plead his case.... Why on earth was he going to miss something like that," he questioned.

McCormick said the sightings put Gary in or nearby the Tumbling Creek area on Thursday and Friday. He noted that the conversation between Gary and the Saltville resident had been casual and that no abnormal behavior had been reported.

"His behavior wasn't erratic; It was entirely normal," he said.

After 21 days, the search of the Tumbling Creek area

came to an end. During that time, McCormick said 18 to 26 search and rescue volunteers per day came to the area from all over Southwest Virginia, working in shifts to search the ground, Laurel Bed Lake and the entire stretch of Tumbling Creek through what's known locally as "the gorge." The Virginia State Police also brought in a helicopter to search from the air and tracking K9s were brought in from several agencies for ground searches.

Not a shred of a lead was discovered.

"No footprints, no articles of clothing, no trash left behind, no signs of a campsite, no signs of an animal attack or struggle," McCormick said.

Earp was quick to dismiss the possibility that his son could have gotten lost in the forest or been carried off by a wild animal. He said Gary had been camping and fishing in the area since he was 4 years old and knew the land and its inhabitants "from one end to the other."

"He knew that place," Earp said. "He'd been all over that place over there. It wasn't like it was the first time he'd been there. He'd been going over there since he was like 4 years old."

As for the wildlife, Earp said, "He knew the animals over there—the bear, the deer, the snakes and everything—he knew all that. So I just don't believe that that's the case."

Earp said he believes something more sinister led to his son's disappearance.

"I believe something else happened, somebody met him up there or something," he said. Pointing to the food left behind in his son's truck, Earp wonders if Gary expected to meet someone.

But no signs of violence or foul play have been discovered, nor have any leads surfaced to suggest any other cause for Gary's disappearance. McCormick said all avenues are still being considered.

"After the search ended, the case pretty much went cold and no other leads—nothing's come in," he said.

As for his own theories, McCormick said, "You toss around everything when these things happen," adding that "I try not to develop theories about what happened until we've got some evidence to point us in a certain direction and we just don't have anything on this case."

Investigators collected DNA samples from Gary's father and one of his daughters and have entered them into the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System. Known as NamUs, the database seeks to connect the remains of unidentified decedents to those who have been reported missing. Gary has also been listed into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC), which allows law enforcement to quickly access an index of missing persons and criminal information should they encounter that person.

Additionally, McCormick also runs regular checks on

Gary's social security number to see if it's been used in employment or other records.

So far nothing has come up. Earp said Gary's disappearance has been incredibly hard on the family.

"His family misses him terribly bad; his girls miss him terribly bad. We'd just like to have some closure on it," he said.

Now, at 74 years old, Earp still visits the Tumbling Creek area, his most recent trip was this Fourth of July.

"I've been over there every year since then and I've looked and I've looked and I've looked and nothing. At all."

Despite the devastating experience tied to the area, though, Earp said Tumbling Creek still holds so many happy memories for his family, memories of Gary—memories he plans to continue to make.

"I want to pass it on to my grandchildren and great-grandchildren because it's a good place," he said. "Lots of good memories. Just one bad memory. And I don't want to stop them from experiencing a good place."

"But if I knew what happened to him, I'm sure it would be a lot better," he added. "I would just like to know what happened to him. That's all. Just to get some closure. That's all I want."

Anyone with information that could help in the investigation into Gary's disappearance is asked to call the Smyth County Sheriff's Office at 276-783-7204. Tips can remain anonymous.

DNA could help solve 2020 Bland slaying

Killing of PA man has authorities stumped two years later

JASMINE FRANKS
Staff

Along the side of a remote highway known for its scenic views and rich history stands a small makeshift memorial set up by family members hundreds of miles away to mark the spot where 57-year-old Bruce Ritchie was stabbed to death more than two years ago.

In the months and years after state police launched their investigation into the Pennsylvania man's slaying, South Gap community members have helped care for the memorial while an agent specializing in cold cases continues to work to solve the case.

"This one's a modern-day homicide," said Special Agent Russell Edwards. "I'd just hate to think that we can't solve it."

Edwards was assigned the case last October when he was selected as the state police's Division Four cold case agent. Although a case isn't typically considered "cold" until it's gone unsolved for five or more years, an absence of witnesses and lack of physical evidence has made Ritchie's death difficult to solve.

"Usually, you'll have a witness, good physical evidence..., but this one? Super random. You have no witnesses, no video surveillance — absolutely nothing — out in the middle of nowhere," he said.

Edwards was among the initial investigators who processed the Wilderness Road crime scene on May 23, 2020, after a passerby had discovered Ritchie's body in a ditch off the road.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Bruce M. Ritchie



PHOTO COURTESY THE VIRGINIA STATE POLICE

Bruce Ritchie's rented Nissan Sentra was parked in a wide pull-off area off the South Gap exit of Interstate 77.

At the scene, Ritchie's rented Nissan Sentra was parked in a large gravel pull-off, a small pool of blood on the ground in front of the car, another by the front passenger's side door and other smears on the car's body.

In a grassy ditch 20 to 30 feet off the road lay Ritchie's body with a single stab wound to the back and a defensive wound to his right hand. Nearby, investigators

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Slaying

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found a discarded Mossy Oak hunting knife.

A nuclear training specialist for Westinghouse, Ritchie had been passing through the area on Interstate 77, returning home to Hermine, Pennsylvania, from a business trip in Georgia when he pulled off the interstate at Exit 62 to allow a headache to ease.

Ritchie's widow, Dawn Ritchie, said her husband frequently suffered headaches and had called her the previous night around 10:30 p.m. to let her know he was pulling off the interstate.

"He had a headache 24 hours a day, seven days a week, but it had gotten very severe that night, so he had taken some medication and pulled off on the side of the road to rest and let the medicine kick in before he went on to his hotel," she said.

She said she told her husband to call her when he got to the hotel room he'd reserved across the state line in West Virginia.

"But, obviously, he never made it," she said.

Dawn Ritchie said she fell asleep shortly after her husband called that night. When she awoke the next morning, Ritchie said, she just assumed he'd forgotten to call once he reached his hotel and that he would have already been back on the road.

"But, then when it got the time he should have been home and I still hadn't heard from him, I'm like 'OK.' So, I started making lots of phone calls and not getting a response," she said.

Under what she called "the typical TV expectation" that a person can't be reported missing until they've been missing for 24 hours, Dawn Ritchie said she waited until that night to call police with her concerns.

"And about an hour later,

the (Pennsylvania) State Police showed up at our house," she said.

Bruce Ritchie's body hadn't been discovered until about noon that day. The tall grass around him made it impossible for those driving by to see him from the road, Edwards said. The late hour and the location of the pull-off on the remote road also meant few people were around who could have noticed anything out of the ordinary.

"We interviewed several people that saw the car," Edwards said, "but no one saw anyone around it."

Using cell phone data, investigators were able to determine Bruce Ritchie made his last stop before pulling off in Bland County at a Luv's Truck Stop in Lamsburg to refuel. Through video surveillance at the gas station, they were able to conclude he was the only person traveling in the car.

Edwards said an interesting fact about the state of Ritchie's rental car was that the driver's seat was still in the reclined position, "like either he jumped out of the car quickly or maybe was forced out."

The agent said the crime appeared random and disorganized, though he's still not sure what the motive might have been. He noted that nothing had been taken from Bruce Ritchie's car and it didn't appear that anyone had gone through it.

The man's wallet, computer bags and luggage were all still inside.

"It's my belief — and this is not proven or anything — that Bruce Ritchie gave up a fight and probably spooked a person that was possibly trying to rob him," Edwards said.

The agent said there appeared to be some hand-to-hand fighting to occur, pointing out that the neck and tail area of Bruce Ritchie's shirt had been stretched out as if he had been grabbed by the shirt. He also noted the defensive wound to his right hand.

A smear of what was later con-

firmed to be Bruce Ritchie's blood was found on the front passenger door handle of his car. Edwards believes that smear came from Bruce Ritchie's defensive wound, suggesting to the agent that he'd tried to open the door during the attack.

"I believe he was going in to get his cell phone when he was stabbed in the back," Edwards said, noting the pool of blood on the ground near the door.

Investigators had hoped the knife found at the scene would help lead them to Bruce Ritchie's assailant. In stabbing cases, Edwards explained, attackers often inadvertently wound themselves, leaving behind traces of their own blood.

But, DNA analyses performed at the state crime lab in Roanoke and at a private lab in Texas only uncovered DNA belonging to Bruce Ritchie. Examinations of all other samples from the crime scene returned the same results.

Edwards said the investigation has taken them down a number of avenues, all of which have led to dead ends, but none of which he's willing to rule out at this stage.

"We've went down several rabbit holes," he said.

And, to date, police haven't gotten a single tip in the case.

"No tips whatsoever on this one," he said.

Later on, investigators heard from a state police profiler who came to speak with them about the case.

The profiler told them the offender appeared to be disorganized and could possibly have been a transient, a person passing through with no ties to the area.

Edwards said investigators had spoken with two transients in the initial stages of the investigation.

"One we ruled out, the other we can't rule out," Edwards said.

While other avenues have been explored, Edwards believes the transient theory is the most likely.

He hopes to soon have some answers, or at least a little more evidence to work with.

About a week before speaking about the case, Edwards learned that Virginia's Office of the Attorney General had agreed to fund additional forensic testing at a private lab in Florida. He hopes the lab may be able to find touch DNA on Bruce Ritchie's shirt.

A relatively new method of analyzing DNA, touch DNA requires only very small samples to test.

"I believe if the person did lay their hands on him, there will be some DNA, some sweat.

A person doing something like that is going to sweat a little," he said, though he noted that the presence of so much of Bruce Ritchie's own blood and a down-pour of rain the morning he was found could make that task more difficult.

The Florida lab will also test a shirt collected from the transient who investigators couldn't rule out. Edwards said that person is considered a "person of interest" at this point and not a suspect.

Right now, Edwards said, "DNA testing is our best hope."

Dawn Ritchie said she's hopeful the testing will help lead to closure for the family.

"His death is a very significant loss not just to myself and our children, but to our friends, family and community at large," she said. "He was just that kind of a person."

Dawn Ritchie described her husband, a father of six and U.S. Navy veteran, as "the most honest, helpful, caring person that you could meet. He was always there for everybody."

He was the kind of guy who would go out of his way to help anyone, she said. She wonders if that good-natured and helpful personality could have played a part in his death.

"This is my own kind of theory, but if he were laying there sleeping and somebody knocked on his

window trying to get his attention and he got out thinking he was going to help somebody...that's just who he was," she said.

Dawn Ritchie said she would love to see the person responsible for her husband's killing brought to justice, but she tries not to dwell on it, saying, "It's just too difficult to wrap my head around."

"I just made a determination early on that the person who took him away from us wasn't getting anything else from us. So, I've tried to just kind of focus on moving forward, taking care of the kids, just kind of living the way he would have wanted us to live instead of dwelling on the situation."

She added, "God knows who did it and in the end, if they've not committed their life to Him and switched it around, then I believe they'll get theirs in the end."

Dawn Ritchie expressed immense gratitude to members of the Bland County community. Following her husband's death, she said, several community members reached out to her on social media.

"A special thanks to everybody in that community who reached out to us and let us know that they were praying for us and that kind of thing. It meant a lot," she said.

Some of those people, she still keeps in touch with. She said her family is also touched at the community's willingness to help maintain the small memorial, keeping the area around it trimmed and cleared of debris.

"It's just overwhelming to me that someone would take their time to do that for us and to just keep his memory alive for us there," she said.

As of Monday, Edwards did not yet know when the collected items would be sent to the Florida lab for testing.

Both he and Dawn Ritchie encourage anyone who may have seen anything that night to come forward. Tips can be reported at 276-228-3131.

Family praying for answers

Investigation into woman's disappearance continues

JASMINE FRANKS
Staff

The investigation into the disappearance of Myra Gertrude Ramey hasn't gone cold.

Not yet.

A little more than two years since the Davenport, Virginia, woman went missing, Buchanan County investigators are still following up on what they consider "promising" leads.

"Goal one is to get Myra home, and then goal two and on is to fully investigate what happened," said Mike Hatfield, who now leads the investigation.

Ramey was reported missing by family members late on Sunday, Sept. 6, 2020. At the time of her disappearance, the 47-year-old had been living with her new boyfriend in a home next door to and owned by her mother, Gertrude Barton. Ramey had met Larry Vanmeter in Maryland, where she'd briefly moved in July. By early August, she made her way back to Virginia with her new beau in tow, family members said.

Barton said she last saw her daughter the previous evening as Ramey and Vanmeter were preparing to go out for a motorcycle ride. Mother and daughter sat on Barton's porch chatting for a bit before they took off, she said. In true mother form, Barton recalled urging her daughter to put on her jacket before they left out.

"I told her she better put her jacket on because it was turning cool."

Barton said Ramey tied the jacket around her waist, "and, she got on the motorcycle behind him and they left. That was about 6 o'clock."

The following day, another relative who came to visit with Ramey

at her home found that she hadn't returned with Vanmeter the previous night. Ramey's niece, Lora Presley, said Vanmeter told the family that they'd returned that night to swap the motorcycle for a truck and went out to the home of some friends of Ramey's, about a 10-minute drive from their home. On the way back home, he told them, they'd gotten into an argument and Ramey asked to be let out. He said she got out of the truck near Duty Freewill Baptist Church in the Indian Creek Road area on Helen Henderson Highway.

Presley said the then-80-year-old Barton called the friends to see if they knew where Ramey was.

They said they didn't.

"So my grandmother goes and she starts knocking on doors at homes where she thought she might be," Presley said. "She was nowhere to be found."

Later that afternoon, Presley and her husband made the drive from Washington County to help search for Ramey on foot along with Presley's sister and mother.

Turning up no clues to Ramey's whereabouts, Presley filed a missing person's report with the Buchanan County Sheriff's Office that night.

Picking up where family members left off, deputies did a cursory search of the area as best they could in the dark. That search continued the following morning as they checked with nearby residents while an investigator began questioning those who last saw Ramey. Meanwhile, friends and community members joined in, some searching from horseback or on ATVs.

Vanmeter told police that Ramey was likely under the influence of drugs and that she had accidentally grabbed his cell phone instead of hers when she got out of the truck, but Hatfield said investigators were unable to collect any data from the phone that would



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

help them locate Ramey. The cell phone company reported that there had been no activity since the time Ramey was last seen. Investigators also tried to track her down through debit and EBT card usage with no luck. Though there had been no transactions since the time Ramey reportedly got out of the truck, an EBT purchase and video surveillance from a store in Honaker helped investigators narrow their timeline.

In the first hours and days of the investigation, police considered the possibility that Ramey may have just wanted some time to herself to cool off, but as the days passed, their rescue efforts would turn into a possible recovery operation.

"Nobody had heard from her, there'd been no activity on her debit card or anything like that," said Chief Deputy Eric Breeding. "Within the first week, we decided as a group, 'you know, something ain't right. She's gone or somebody's done something to her.'"

By that time, Ramey's family had already begun to fear that something terrible had happened.

"Myra didn't live a perfect life," Presley said. "She did have a his-

tory of some substance abuse. She wasn't perfect; she had problems. But she had patterns and this did not fit a pattern of anything she'd ever done."

Describing Ramey as a loving person who was close with her family, Presley and Barton said she had daily contact with her mother, often making the short walk next door to have meals with her.

"She always hugged me, 'Mom, I love you,'" Barton said. "She was a loving person and she loved animals. She had her faults, but she was sweet person."

Suddenly going off the radar did not fit Ramey's character, they said.

"Myra was close with her mother and the fact that she left her phone and her dog were two red flags to us," Presley said.

About a week after Ramey's disappearance, a larger rescue team put together by the Virginia Department of Emergency Management joined and expanded the effort to find Ramey, employing off-road vehicles, cadaver dogs and divers. Altogether, VDEM team members and community volunteers searched the ground, abandoned houses, nearby ponds

and streams, gas wells, strip mines and old logging roads.

Those efforts turned up no sign of Ramey.

Early on in the investigation, Breeding said police began to suspect something sinister may have occurred. Hatfield explained that investigators had reason to believe that Ramey may have gone to confront another person with whom she'd had a disagreement.

That person, along with Vanmeter and the two friends Ramey and Vanmeter had previously visited, Breeding said, are now considered persons of interest in her disappearance.

"That would be the last people that were with her and, of course, her boyfriend because he was the last to say he saw her," the chief deputy said.

Breeding and Hatfield explained that while a person of interest can later turn into a suspect, they can also be eliminated as such or become witnesses instead.

"Persons of interest would be those that are close to her that maybe circumstances and statements that we got would lead us to believe that maybe—not saying that they do have more information about her disappearance—but they could have more information that maybe we've not found or they've not told us and we're still continuing to pursue what they may know."

Though he was reluctant to go into specifics, Breeding said of the person they believe Ramey went to confront, "There was a specific piece of evidence that led us to believe that he was more involved with her disappearance."

All four persons of interest have been interviewed and offered polygraph tests, Breeding said, explaining that while polygraphs cannot be used in court, they're a useful tool in helping investigators suss out information. Two of the

Answers

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four have undergone the polygraph, including Vanmeter, while others have been medically or otherwise unable to do so. Breeding explained that some medical or mental health conditions and certain medications can disqualify a person from undergoing the examination.

The fourth person of interest, the one investigators believe may have been involved in Ramey's disappearance, later moved across the country to Oregon, where he died in May.

"That doesn't mean that we're going to stop, because we still got three other people of interest that we're staying real close to, keeping tabs on, talking to," Breeding said.

Vanmeter, who was on federal probation at the time, returned to Maryland under orders from his probation officer. Investigators keep in contact with Maryland authorities to keep tabs on him and Breeding said Vanmeter also still keeps occasional contact with Ramey's family.

Since that initial search of the Indian Creek area, a number of other searches have been conducted and several search warrants executed, including one for the home Ramey and Vanmeter had visited before she went missing. That search

turned up no evidence that would help the investigation, Hatfield said.

Investigators have also followed up on an untold number of tips submitted by the community, leading to searches of water wells, old logging sites and abandoned mines outside the jurisdiction, among many other places. Hatfield and Breeding said Virginia State Police and surrounding county agencies, particularly the Dickenson County Sheriff's Office, have been phenomenal in helping accommodate their investigation and look into tips in their jurisdictions.

Hatfield expects additional searches to take place later this fall.

The two men also believe they may be closer to getting their hands on a long-rumored piece of evidence that may be able to help break the case.

The nature of that evidence they're keeping to themselves.

Though they'd like to believe Ramey could be found safe, family members don't hold out much hope at this point.

"It seems odd referring to her in past tense," Presley said. "We'd like to think that maybe she is out there somewhere, somehow; but the reality is she and her mother were extremely close and Myra would never let her or her family worry in this way. It's torment."

Barton said her three remaining

daughters have been deeply depressed since their sister's disappearance, with one of them reluctant to even leave her home.

"It's really hurt our family," she said.

Presley said Ramey's disappearance has taken a toll on the family, saying her grandmother had already lost three of her seven children.

"A family can comprehend death," she said. "But you can't comprehend this. Not knowing keeps you awake at night. There's no closure."

Pointing to what she called "distasteful" and "very explicit and ugly" videos posted to YouTube about the case, Presley said, "This case has experienced scrutiny because of some of her life and relationship choices, but it's also brought all of us more awareness for the need for advocacy and resources to combat substance abuse and mental health issues in our area."

Hatfield suggested putting oneself the family's position.

"That's someone's daughter, someone's sister, someone's mother," he said.

The family does what it can to keep Ramey's disappearance in people's minds, putting out banners and flyers in public and sharing information online. At home, they try to keep hope alive, hang-

ing an ornament adorned with Ramey's photo on the Christmas tree each year.

"We're a very, very close-knit family and each holiday just seems like there's another empty chair at the table," Presley said. "It's very difficult. We pray for answers every single day."

Presley said the dead ends in the investigation have been a source of frustration to the family, but the fact it hasn't come to a complete standstill gives them some hope that they'll someday have closure.

Family and investigators keep in regular contact, with Hatfield touching base with them as recently as the day before he spoke about the investigation. He said with a drawn-out case like this one, it's difficult not to develop a certain closeness with family members.

Likewise, knowing some of the family members personally, Breeding said he really felt for them.

"We're doing everything we can do," he said.

Small communities like those in Buchanan County, where everyone knows one another, are known to come together when one of its members is in need. Through the ordeal, Presley said, the family has never been alone.

"That's what friendship and faith does," Presley said. "That's one thing about Southwest Virginia.

People come together in times of need and we're grateful for that."

During the initial searches for Ramey, Presley said churches and individuals who couldn't physically help in the search offered support by bringing water and snacks for those scouring the mountainous terrain.

"And we can never be grateful enough, because that touched our heart in ways that we could never express," Presley said.

Not long after Ramey's disappearance, a card drive was held for Barton. Presley said her grandmother received more than 250 cards from friends, acquaintances, churches and complete strangers.

"Just encouraging her and people coming together just to let her know that they were thinking of her and praying for her," Presley said.

Two years later, Barton said she still receives the occasional card.

"And we still meet people out and they say, 'I'm praying for you,'" she said.

Pledges of donations from family, friends and local businesses have also allowed the family to offer an \$11,000 reward for any information that leads to locating Ramey.

Both the family and investigators encourage anyone with information that could help the investigation to come forward. Hatfield can be reached at 276-935-2313. Tips can remain anonymous.